

Practising Public Sociologies? Possibilities, Pragmatics and Policy

Paper presented at Public Sociologies: Trans-Tasman Comparisons
TASA and SAANZ Joint Conference
University of Auckland, 4 – 7 December 2007

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Introduction

Michael Burawoy's advocacy of 'public sociology' in his 2004 Presidential Address to the American Sociological Association has sparked a range of responses within the USA and internationally (Burawoy, 1984a). In this paper we provide an appreciative reading of aspects of the case for 'public sociology' and consider the relationship between his imaginings about this aspect of sociological practice and our own experiences as professional sociologists with long-term interests in taking sociological skills, value frameworks and theoretical understandings into forms of engagement outside the academy. We conclude with some critical reflections on some of Burawoy's recent attempts to articulate the responsibility of sociologists vis a vis 'society'.

Burawoy's advocacy of public sociology and his attempt to breathe new life into it is shaped by the context of sociology in the USA, a context in which professional sociology is exceptionally well developed. Our engagement with his arguments about public sociology is influenced by our immersion in a different context, Aotearoa New Zealand, where professional sociology is relatively underdeveloped; where what Burawoy refers to as 'policy sociology' has often been dominant; and where critical sociology has mainly involved using analytic tools developed in other contexts. What we share with Burawoy are personal academic histories that span the time frames he reviews and some experience of sociology in at least two overlapping contexts, South Africa and the USA. Discussion of public sociology, and in particular Burawoy's claims for it, have occurred in numerous academic journals over the last three years, most recently in a special issue on 'Sociology and its Public Face/s' in the October issue of the UK journal *Sociology*. In this paper, despite the theme for this conference, we do not embark on a trans-Tasman comparison with respect to public sociology/ies, but invite those with experience of that context to articulate what is similar and different in the Australian environment.

While Burawoy's case for public sociology is not overtly autobiographical, it is interspersed, especially in more recent articulations of his position, with reflections on his personal engagement with sociologies in different contexts (for example, South Africa in 1990 compared to more recently), and his location as a young sociologist in the 1970s interested in sociologies that challenged the dominance of structural functionalism and addressed the political issues of that era. In his characterization of 'radical sociology' Burawoy (2005b: 314) uses 'our' and 'we' to review the persistent attention by radical scholars to the transformation of the academy rather than engagement beyond it as "we behaved like run-of-the-mill scholars, scavenging the writings of Marx and Engels (and their successors) for material that would help us comprehend the limits and possibilities of contemporary capitalism."

In this paper we similarly draw on our intellectual biographies, offering stories that are framed by our recent reading and re-reading of Burawoy's arguments and critiques offered by others. Like most autobiographies they are partial, constructed and 'true' accounts shaped by potential audiences and contexts as much as by experiences. They are informed by the position that any writing is in some way autobiographical and that the process of writing also writes us. As J. M. Coetzee (1992:17) has suggested: "... in a larger sense all writing is autobiography: everything you write, including criticism and fiction, writes you as you write it."

Public sociologies – an appreciation

Why are we drawn to what Burawoy has to say about public sociologies? What is the basis for our sense of synergy and connection with his advocacy of a public sociology that "brings sociology into conversation with publics, understood as people who are themselves involved in conversation" (Burawoy, 2005: 7)? Like Burawoy, both of us were drawn to sociology as a practice that involved critical interrogation of existing social arrangements and exploration of alternative ways of being, relating to others and organising social life. Why would anyone be interested in pursuing the study of sociology or being a professional sociologist if they were not interested in these things?

For Geoff sociology was attractive as a space to explore interactions among facets of the social that other disciplines divided up from one another. The hubris of sociology, its scope with respect to analysis of economic relations and practices (Economics), formal and informal political power (Political Science), political philosophy and abstract theorising (Philosophy), attention to diversity in the organisation of human communities (Anthropology) and formal regulation of relations between people and groups (Law), enabled engagement across artificially divided intellectual spaces.

The pursuit of professional sociology as an end in itself was therefore totally inconsistent with why he was drawn to the study and practice of sociology and ended up working in this field, rather than Political Science, which also provided a supportive context for early investigative work. 'Discipline' was to be resisted. What could be exploited was the space within the organisation of this particular field of practice to address issues relating to health care, the regulation of imports, national specificity and internationalism, social movements and cultural forms which were of interest to publics rather than exclusively those trained as sociologists. This has led to ongoing work with respect to the social determinants of health and how states and communities can respond to them; the intersection between state and market provision of social services; the dynamics of import substitution in New Zealand; the place of rugby as a local and national phenomenon in this context; changes in the structure of health services and what gets done through a cultural form such as Jane Campion's *The Piano*. Why then would he not be drawn to arguments that question the pre-eminence of professional sociology as specific 'discipline'?

In his 1970s thesis research, Geoff's focus was on the emergence of private health insurance and its potential impact on access to health care by those who could neither pay regularly for insurance nor meet the costs of care in private hospitals. Attention to this issue could not be confined to 'the sociology of health', but required analysis of the interaction between the state and market provision of social services as well as people's understandings of how they were positioned in a new context which made private health care accessible to new publics and potentially undermined their support for a public health system (Fougere, 1974). Engagement with this topic entailed interactions with private providers of health care, state officials, health insurers and patients on waiting lists for hospital services. This work generated a long term interest in state/market interactions whether in the field of health care or economic change more generally. It also gave him a taste for the necessity of engagement outside the academy, not just with respect to the 'collection of data', but also in terms of available forms of analysis and reflection on possible interventions. Attention to how things might be different led eventually to involvement in what Burawoy might define as 'policy sociology'.

Rosemary's first interaction with professional sociology was not auspicious. In her first year at Rhodes University in Grahamstown, South Africa, she browsed through the sociology text of a friend (Smelser, 1967) and rejected the option of studying sociology in favour of courses in anthropology where the dominant theoretical framework was also structural-functionalism (Radcliffe-Brown, 1952), but included texts that focused on black South Africans' experience of colonisation and urbanization (for example, Wilson, 1936). Anthropology opened up worlds closed to most white South Africans, while sociology (as it was taught at that time in that place) exposed students to the reproduction in South Africa of white middle class life in the USA. This was the professional sociology against which 'radical' sociologists like Burawoy were at that time reacting to in USA.

The sociology Rosemary encountered at University of Canterbury in the 1970s was very different. The focus was on providing students with the tools for critical analysis of their own social contexts and, in the absence of a competing anthropology programme, first year sociology was taught as comparative sociology rather than the sociology of western industrial societies. Members of social movements were regularly invited into first year classes to explore how they addressed issues that were the subject of abstract sociological analysis. As a teaching fellow and assistant lecturer, she introduced and chaired input into courses from members of Nga Tamatoa, a young Maori radical group; women's refuge founders; men working with men's groups on the critical analysis of NZ masculinities; as well as environmentalists, women's spirituality activists and beneficiary rights groups. There was space and encouragement in that environment to be involved in the organisation of the 1977 Christchurch United Women's Convention, where she applied newly acquired survey research skills to the design, with non-social scientists, of a questionnaire for those attending and worked on the production of a record of that controversial convention with radical, lesbian, socialist and liberal feminists (United Women's Convention, 1978).

Issues Rosemary was confronting in her own life about work and being a parent informed her thesis research and the talks she gave to women's groups, alongside talks to a range of groups about NZ sporting contacts with South Africa. This morphed in the late 1970s into involvement with the Society for Research on Women and involvement in a range of research projects outside the academy on the needs of first time mothers, childcare issues for factory workers, women's access to jobs in male dominated non-professional work and new directions in vocational advice in schools (Society for Research on Women, 1982, 1984a, 1984b, 1985). In a way that was not particularly useful for the crafting of a standard career as a professional sociologist, but satisfying for her, personally and politically, she found in sociology at that time a place in which she could be intellectually and politically challenged, traverse disciplines, including emerging 'Women's Studies' or 'Feminist Scholarship', and engage with diverse groups constituting themselves as 'publics' at that time. Why then, would she not, many years later, respond positively to advocacy of 'organic' public sociology?

Traditional and/or organic public sociology?

In Thesis II of his presidential address, Burawoy (2005a) advocates for both 'traditional' and 'organic' public sociology, both sociologies which are directed at engagement beyond the university, the Polytech or the Teachers' College. Traditional public sociology, as he defines it, involves writing for newspapers and magazines, talking on radio, collaborating with journalists and documentary film makers. This involves addressing a generally 'unseen' public, probably 'mainstream' public without significant interaction or dialogue occurring with

potential audiences. “Organic public sociology” involves interacting with specific groups of people, possibly those who are “counter-publics” rather than “mainstream” citizens (Burawoy, 2005a: 7). These interactions involve listening and learning on the part of sociologists and not just transmission of their research results or arguments.

For over a decade, Geoff engaged in a form of what Burawoy would characterize as ‘traditional’ public sociology as one of the contributors to ‘Sunday Supplement’ a National Radio programme of political and social comment that was aired on Sunday mornings and repeated at different times of the day later in the week. Topics he addressed over several years include issues with respect to New Zealand economic development, new forms of executive power and political style, as well as health service change and its implications. At one level, this form of engagement with publics beyond the academy was limited with respect to its audience (largely middle class professionals and community activists with an interest in social issues) and its levels of interactivity. On the other hand, floating ideas and analyses in this context also generated later conversations and interactions. Arguments articulated in these radio talks would appear in policy documents and submissions by community organisations. In the context of a small nation state, the publics addressed through ‘traditional’ public sociology, may not be as ‘invisible’ or ‘passive’ as they might be in the USA.

Rosemary embarked on a process of mutual education with a variety of women engaged in forms of community activism in the period following the 1977 Christchurch United Women’s Convention when she was involved with Penny Fenwick in running a set of non-credit ‘Women in Society’ courses through what was then called ‘Continuing Education’. Those attending included leaders in what was emerging as ‘the women’s liberation movement’ in the city, as well as long term members of the National Council of Women, new self-defined feminists who had just read Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch*, Christian feminists, those involved in running courses directed at women who wanted to return to paid work after involvement in caring for their children, lesbian feminists with arguments for lesbian separatism and feminist trade unionists. We developed a set of readings and facilitated the often heated discussion among those enrolled in the courses, but we learnt as much, if not more, than those who participated. The style of ‘teaching’ was also informed by emerging feminist critiques of pedagogy.

More recently, Rosemary’s experience of dialogic engagement with diverse groups in the community has been through her involvement in forms of deliberative engagement associated with public discussion and reflection on new science and technologies. This work has been informed by an explicit value claim – that citizens as well as politicians, policy advisors, scientists, lawyers and formal institutions of regulation should have a say in the development and utilization of new biotechnologies such as genetic modification, genetic testing, xenotransplantation and pre-implantation genetic diagnosis. With a team of other researchers (most of them not sociologists) she was involved in a research

programme funded by the Foundation for Research Science and Technology - Constructive Conversations: Kōrero Whakaaetanga: Biotechnologies, dialogue and informed decision-making. This research programme was set up to explore the social, ethical, cultural and spiritual implications of new health biotechnologies. It looked specifically at genetic testing and biobanking and entailed multiple meetings with a range of community-based groups in different parts of Aotearoa New Zealand, a third of them Maori.¹ Access to those groups was facilitated by an excellent programme coordinator who had worked extensively with community organisations, as well as the activation of the community networks of many of the researchers, together with ‘cold calling’ with respect to organisations with which none of us had close connections.

Work with community organisations which included those organised around health, family, education, iwi, professional, religious/spiritual and neighbourhood linkages involved constituting them as new sorts of ‘publics’ – ‘scientific citizens’ - publics with relevant expertise with respect to the principles and practices that should inform the prohibition, regulation or selective uptake of certain new technologies that have a capacity to redefine what it means to be human and relationships between people. While most of the groups had already constituted themselves around agendas that were important to them, the research team recast them, temporarily at least, as those involved in ‘scientific citizenship’.

In many respects this research programme was an exercise in what Burawoy (2005a: 8) might define as ‘organic public sociology’ – it involved engagement with multiple publics, significant dialogue and the activity of actually constituting publics. At another level, the work of critical sociologists like Alan Irwin (2007) alerts us to the dangers of professional sociologists constructing publics in this way and engaging in these practices of participation. The goal of such endeavours is the creation of the forms of democratic public participation that drive Burawoy’s arguments for public sociology as a dimension of sociological work. However, as Irwin (2007: 299) argues “talk of public dialogue and engagement has become increasingly commonplace” in Europe and the UK. It is now a ‘mainstream’ strategy directed at ensuring increased ‘trust’ by publics in new science and technologies that business and state actors see as a source of material advancement for their economies in ‘the knowledge society’.

Irwin (2007: 300) argues that there is a need in science and technology studies (which has been significantly informed by professional sociologists) to be “analytically skeptical” about the ‘new’ mode of scientific governance that focuses on public participation and citizen-science engagement. Those attempting in this way to practice the public sociology that Burawoy advocates can find themselves potentially shoring up the power of mainstream political and economic actors while contributing to the appearance rather than the practice of democracy. It highlights Joan Acker’s insight that public sociology should not only be critical,

¹ See www.conversations.canterbury.ac.nz/PHASEONE/Index.htm for access to information about this research programme, its methodologies and research outputs.

“but also critical of itself” (Acker, 2005: 330). She states that: “Publics have to emerge in a political process; they are not invented in the minds of sociologists” (Acker 2005: 330-1).

As a member of Toi te Taiao: The Bioethics Council, Rosemary is now involved in some related strategies for public engagement about new health biotechnologies. The Council is currently facilitating a set of deliberative events in a variety of community contexts about pre-birth testing and running an online form of public deliberation.² These forms of engagement will inform a report to be published in the first part of 2008 which will include recommendations that take into account the interactions with the multiple publics who participated in these events, face-to-face or virtually.

Toi te Taiao is an independent advisory group, set up in the wake of the Royal Commission on Genetic Modification to address difficult issues relating to the ethical, cultural and spiritual aspects of biotechnologies – aspects that the Commission identified as not adequately addressed by formal regulatory agencies. Does involvement in the work of Toi te Taiao as Council member mean that what Rosemary did as researcher on an earlier project morphs into ‘policy sociology’ because it is now done, not as a research team member, but as a member of a quasi governmental organisation?

The relationship between the pursuit in different contexts, and with different teams of people, strategies for engagement by multiple publics with issues about the implications of new biotechnologies highlights the interactions between the neat divisions between professional, public and policy sociologies. As sociologist in both contexts, Rosemary seeks to apply critical skills and draw on the reflections of academics like Alan Irwin and a host of other STS scholars. But in neither of these contexts is she solely doing ‘sociology’, nor working with sociologists. Interaction with the multiple ‘publics’ drawn into such discussions is not facilitated by her introducing herself as someone involved in doing an ‘ology’. And the reports produced and critical analyses offered in both these teams are collective and involve comprises, negotiations and reframings that are informed by the disciplinary skills and professional experiences of others as well as a range of different audiences.

Designation as professional sociologist creates the possibility of sociologists engaging in these practices, but the exercise of ‘disciplinarity’ is often both impossible and counter productive. This is consistent with Stanley Aronowitz’s critical engagement with the way in which Burawoy’s public sociology remains a **disciplinary** sociology. He argues that “the human sciences need to blur, if not abandon their disciplinary boundaries” as they recognise the limitations of these

² See the Toi te Taiao: The Bioethics Council website for information about the *Who Gets Born Project* www.bioethics.org.nz/about-bioethics/issues-in-focus/prebirth-testing/index.html

historically constructed silos and embrace what he refers to as 'a human sciences project' (Aronowitz, 2005: 336-7).

Public and Policy Sociologies – overlaps and connections

Burawoy argues that both public sociology and policy sociology are orientated to audiences, publics and forms of engagement beyond the academy. But while public sociology is about opening up possibilities through interaction with diverse and multiple publics, policy sociology "is sociology in the service of a goal defined by a client" (Burawoy, 2005a: 9). These clients may contract sociologists to exercise their professional skills on a particular well defined project (such as a piece of research for a government department or ministry) or they may "define broad policy agendas" which sociologists may take up in different ways. An example of the latter might be the Requests for Proposals defined by the New Zealand Foundation for Research, Science and Technology that identify areas in which research is sought (for example, migration, youth and employment etc). Researchers inside and outside the academy have the opportunity of defining how they will do this research with what publics, informed by what theoretical agendas and bidding for the money available.

Both Rosemary and Geoff have engaged in what might be defined as 'policy sociology', but both have resisted being constituted as those who produce knowledge for a client who defines the agendas and appropriates the product. In many ways doing this type of research is what is increasingly encouraged within the New Zealand university system. Gaining a contract from a government agency to produce a product, whether it is a literature review or a piece of investigative work, is important as a way of demonstrating that you have skills that are externally valued, that you can produce 'useful' and 'relevant' research, that you generate income other than through teaching, and that you will produce 'overheads' which will in part pay for the costs of the computer on your desk, your internet time, the journals you read, and the heating of your room.

We have both been interested in forms of policy orientated work as sociologists that involve advisory groups setting agendas, using state resources to generate knowledge that might not otherwise be available, establishing networks among sets of actors which could be difficult for state actors to accomplish directly. Needless to say, this is not the work that generates most money for universities or particular schools and programmes within them.

Geoff has been involved in at least two major forms of advisory work with respect to health that have occurred within the context of parameters set by state actors, but also involved some significant opportunities for flexibility within the spaces created by institutions which are both within and independent from the apparatus of the state. As a member of the Health Benefits Review team between 1985 and 1987 Geoff was involved with other members of this review in crafting an account

of the interactions between public and private provision of health services and offering a set of scenarios for future directions in the provision of health care (Scott et al, 1986). The scenarios outlined in the report of the Health Benefits Review underpinned subsequent public debate among diverse publics about the future direction of the health system and the state's role in that system.

More recently, Geoff has been a member of the National Health Committee and currently chairs the Public Health Advisory Committee. The National Health Committee (NHC) is established in statute, has its own budget and provides independent advice directly to the Minister of Health on matters relating to the provision of health care and factors bearing on health. Members with expertise in a variety of different aspects of health are appointed by the Minister of Health. The NHC is supported by a small secretariat of policy analysts and researchers who work to NHC. It responds to requests from the Minister's for advice, but also sets its own agendas, researches material for its own reports, interacts on its own terms with a range of actors within the health system as well as with state and commercial actors in other fields that have an impact on human health.

Is work for such an organisation "service of a goal defined by the client"? Yes, in some respects, but no in others. It does provide advice on issues that the Minister defines, but members of the committee also formulate advice on topics of their choosing. These topics are often informed by issues of broad public concern, and the advice offered may be critical of current government policy.

Perhaps work in this field could be defined as public and policy sociology, for the any professional sociologist involved in this work? State actors, biomedical health providers, complementary medicine experts, public health advocates, iwi health providers, health movement groups, patients and patient advocate organisations bring their agendas to the table of the National Health Committee and interact with Committee members in various contexts. This is not unlike the way Burawoy characterizes public sociology as activity that "strikes up a dialogic relation between sociologist and public in which the agenda of each is brought to the table, in which each adjusts to the other" (Burawoy, 2005a: 9).

Rosemary has experienced a temporary secondment as a sociologist within a state agency, completed evaluation contracts for state agencies and held positions on advisory committees or councils. She has experienced using her professional skills for the state as a client (writing speeches for Ministers, developing policy documents, reporting on interdepartmental meetings, evaluating research proposals from those working in state agencies) and concurs with Burawoy's characterization of that work. However, she has found it possible to negotiate and dialogue about agendas for pieces of contract work completed in collaboration with researchers in other institutions.³

³ This was possible on a contract she held jointly with other social researchers to evaluate the MoRST Dialogue Fund Projects. See Cross Case Study Learning Group (2005) *From 'dialogue' to 'engagement'?* *Learning Beyond Cases* www.morst.govt.nz/Documents/work/sis/Cross-Case-Study-Learning-Group.pdf

Recent work as a member of Toi te Taiao involves setting agendas rather than responding to the state as a client, and in that sense work for the Council is consistent with public sociology as Burawoy has defined it. However, the need to constitute the Council as providing 'relevant' and 'timely' advice means that its work is not totally independent of state agendas nor of those of other advisory groups with which its work intersects. If we embrace the possibilities of a public sociology because we are interested in change in the way social worlds are organised and resources distributed in them, then we will always be to some extent constrained by the agendas of those with power, their time frames and the languages that we may need to use to achieve some of the changes we think are important. While the Bioethics Council and the National Health Committee have the freedom to set their own agendas rather than respond to the dictates of the client, they have little decision-making power. The possibilities of action on the recommendations advocated may require more than the assertion of independence, engagement with multiple publics and the provision of accessible, lively, critically conceived and well argued advice. They may involve weaving policy and public sociologies.

In some respects these reflections on our positioning as policy and public sociologists illustrates Michael Burawoy's (2005a: 11) reflections on the ways in which public and policy sociologies may 'blur' – but it is often not as simple as sociology simultaneously serving "a client" and generating "public debate." Our interest is in day-to-day and week-by-week critical analysis of how one can retain a focus on knowledge for whom and for what in often shifting environments which are multiply determined.

Public sociologies – some reservations

From the discussion above, it is clear that our interest is less in defending a specifically professional sociology against the inroads of what Burawoy has referred to as 'public sociology' and more in exploring the intersections between the sociologies he identifies. Our interest in these intersections is consistent with our commitment to the development of spaces across disciplines in the form of health studies, feminist studies and cultural studies. The attraction to us of these interdisciplinary conversations is that they pose important questions about knowledge for what and for whom which are not exclusive to sociology. The pursuit of these cross disciplinary spaces and work with colleagues outside the academy is linked to our pleasure in a sociology that takes novels seriously as well as official statistics, and encompasses the analyses of Dorothy Smith and Latour.

Our appreciation of Burawoy's writing about public sociology lies in his celebration of multiplicity, both with respect to attention to diverse publics and a

diversity of ways of doing sociological work that is more or less orientated to academic or non-academic audiences or interlocutors. Our discomfort lies with aspects of his advocacy that seem in tension with this openness and in the identification of 'society' as an analytic category always distinct from 'state' and 'market'. In a recent paper that positions public sociology in opposition to both 'the state' and 'the market'; he argues that sociologists need to "engage directly with society before it disappears altogether" (Burawoy, 2007: 357). While we see knowledge production as inevitably shaped by its historical context, we are also resistant to the argument that sociology is, perhaps 'in the last instance' determined by the material relations of production – that third-wave marketisation "calls forth the age of public sociology" (Ibid).

Our experience as sociologists is a catalyst for our attention to interactions and intersections between state, market and civil society and the necessity for attention to each these fields and their various sets of overlapping actors. We are not convinced that sociologists "have to turn away from the policy worlds of state and economy that know only too well what they do not want" and "seek out and cultivate other audiences, namely publics" that will act as "a countervailing force to third-wave marketisation" (Burawoy, 2007: 360). The search for 'publics' uncontaminated by 'state' or 'market' mirrors some states' interest in finding 'innocent' or uncontaminated 'publics' to participate in discussion of science and technology. Is the task of sociologists to identify the 'truly' public publics and sustain them or to engage in the critical analysis of the interactions between multiple publics, few of them 'innocent' of connections to markets or states?

The construction of society, "its associations, movements and its publics" as "shattered" or on the brink of extinction to be saved from the jaws of death by the kiss of life from sociologists is unconvincing and excessive in the power it attributes to a particular facet of social science based predominantly in universities, state agencies and some private research companies (Burawoy, 2007: 360). Globalisation spurs resistance and forms of active civil engagement rather than being solely the juggernaut that flattens a vulnerable civil society that clever and committed sociologists will resuscitate. While the devastation that Hurricane Katrina wreaked on poor citizens in New Orleans can be attributed to failures in state action at both a local and a national level, the power of commercial interests and the operation of the US military machine (Burawoy, 2007: 359), it has galvanized critique of the Bush administration as well as highlighting the significance of climate change and activism in response to it. Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath requires attention to a multiplicity of factors contributing to the death of over a thousand people and a diversity of responses by business, state and community-based actors.

In a recent issue of *Sociology*, Gregor McLennan (2007: 869) has argued that: "public sociology has been excessively anthropomorphized, and we run the risk of serious disappointment if we think of sociology as having some socio-political voice or presence all of its own." We share his concern about the

anthropomorphism of public sociology and his skepticism about its unique role in fostering democratic public engagement, grass-roots community associations, social movements and political activism that contests state action and the strategies of commercial actors, local, national or global. If civil society requires the actions of sociologists acting in their own 'self-interest' to defend it against contemporary globalization and commercialization of social relations with which all states are constituted as "colluding," then the project of political resistance is indeed in dire straits (Burawoy, 2007: 365). To breathe life into associations, social movements and forms of civic resistance in order to save itself dignifies neither our fellow citizens nor ourselves as sociologists. Or is our resistance to his vision just a function of our location in a small democratic nation state in which professional sociology is both much weaker than its institutionalized US equivalent and people's aspirations for democratic engagement with the direction of their country somewhat stronger?

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